

HISTORY OF “OUR SCHOOL “

(Memories of University City Senior High School in the 1950's)

Mrs. Augustus Gottlieb was our English teacher, but so much more. Through books she opened our minds and then stepped into our lives. Her words and wisdom stayed with many of us through the years. She taught us a sense of tears in things, a hunger for justice, respect for the human person, a love of learning and of all things adventurous and beautiful. In 1952 she proposed a challenge: to capture the brief, elusive moments that we called the spirit of our school. The writing tasks fell to Mrs. Gottlieb's senior writing class and to the writing club, Pen in Hand. The principals were: Peggy Sower Knoepfle, Carolyn Glazier Litwin, Ronald E. Meyer, Millard Susman and Judy Ulbricht Porta. The photography tasks fell to Boris (Ross) Stiffleman and to members of the Camera Club, principally John Miller.

We began writing thoughts about a building made of yellow bricks, standing on a hill, where classes and teachers and friendships shaped our futures; where we came with neat brown spiral notebooks five days a week, six hours a day, seeking answers to our questions; where in those many days and nights we slowly or suddenly awakened to beauty and sadness and joy, where we learned how to be poets, painters, actors, dancers and musicians. Over time a narration was written and photographic accompaniment was captured—the movie had begun. Looking back, now more than 60 years ago, how audacious it was for high school students to develop a movie script with photographic accompaniment using amateur pieces of equipment.

Making a documentary in the modern sense was not our objective. We chose not to feature individual faces and the only voice was classmate John Wilson's superb reading of the text. We focused in on an explosion in the chem lab, a sculpture in the making, the student body standing for the Alma Mater, our graduation procession in caps and gowns. We were not after a precise record of how we looked or who we were as individuals. Our goal, rather, was a sentimental

pilgrimage in words and visual imagery through which we hoped to capture the intangible we call school spirit.

Carolyn Glaser Litwin recalls:

"Our School" premiered at an all-school assembly shortly before our graduation. Other classes saw it for a few years afterward. Then it disappeared, its whereabouts unknown, except for the sound track which I had transferred to six sides of 78-speed vinyl records. Eventually, I had the sound track updated to tape recordings. And years after that, I carried it back to Topeka and had the antiquated product transposed to a video cassette. In Topeka it silently resided, a found treasure but still lost to all but me. I wanted to make the movie available to other classmates and to the archives of University City High. I also hoped to find a way to correct sequences where synchronization between the visual and the sound had been lost in the three ensuing technological transitions. At our 34th and 45th reunions, I gathered a few classmates together to see the movie on a small TV screen and to see what help I could find. At the gathering in 1997, Lewis Schneider volunteered to take the cassette back to his home in Massachusetts to see what improvements he could make and to explore costs for reproductions. That exploration did not prove productive; the movie remained out of sync and in the hands of only Lewis and myself.

In September 27 and 28, 2002, 109 of our classmates met in St. Louis for our 50th reunion. Hard to believe that 50 years had passed, that the 20th century had become the 21st, and that we had 45 names to memorialize. In the hospitality room groups gathered around the TV to watch "Our School," still desperately in need of a knowing hand to tinker with the problems of its age (the loss of audio and photographic synchronization). Then, quite by serendipity, a knowing hand was offered. Bud Cristal, who had more than 40 years computer experience, offered to take it home to California to work on the problem. Through the magic of email, Lewis and I kept in continual contact with Bud. Bud converted the movie to digital and realigned sight with sound; appended the 1952 class pictures and copied the

movie to VHS tape. A few years later he transformed the VHS tape into a DVD, giving the viewer more control, and added peripheral scenes of the faculty.

With Lewis and Bud's names now added to the credits, the update on the movie is complete and once again alive. Echoes of our shouts and laughter, the morning bell, the shuffle of Spalding saddles on the long, shiny linoleum floors, the hum and hurry of classes — these echoes, so long silent, now rustle from out of the dust. Once again they envelop the memories we tried so hard to capture with our words. We say to Mrs. Gottlieb: “Your dream, dear teacher and friend, lives on, as you do in our thoughts.”

Augusta Gottlieb taught English at University City High School for 20 years, beginning in 1946. She died June 21, 1993, at the age of 92.

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